



eighth edition

Tenzin Tsundue had momentary global celebrity in January 2002 when he scaled 14 floors of a Mumbai hotel to greet Zhu Rongji - then premier of the People's Republic of China - with a "FREE TIBET" banner and a Tibetan national flag. In India, land of his exile birth, his poems and his activist-patriotism had already won him a following amongst younger, more politically aware Tibetan refugees. This second volume of poems, stories and opinion takes its title from KORA, an allegory on Tibet's half-century-long struggle to break free from Chinese control. Another story, *My Kind of Exile*, won a major Indian literary prize for expressing "the tragedy of being a Tibetan in this world". Tenzin Tsundue's witty, passionate poems take us deeper into the emotions of this tragedy. This is protest poetry at its finest.

Kora

stories and poems

Tenzin Tsundue

Kora

stories and poems

Tenzin Tsundue

Also by Tenzin Tsundue

CROSSING THE BORDER, 1999

SEMSHOOK: Essays on the Tibetan Freedom Struggle, 2007

TSENGOL: Stories and Poems of Resistance, 2012

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focuses on and publishes the creative work of Tibetans.

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Publisher's Note

Once, travelling to Delhi at the end of one of his numerous trips criss-crossing India, his worn out sneakers were stolen inside the train. He felt pity for the thief – since the shoes were hardly worthy of a dustbin – and trudged barefoot from the train station to the Tibetan colony. This is Tenzin Tsundue, whom Pankaj Mishra describes in *The New York Times* as 'the new and the most visible face' of the 'restless children of the Dalai Lama.' Today's exile youth and their activism are, to a large extent, represented by this small thin man sporting big black-rimmed spectacles and a red bandanna.

To many people Tsundue is a one-man battalion with his weapons randomly filed in his threadbare backpack. He can fish out pamphlets and stickers, cellotape, torch, hard drive and marker pens at a moment's notice. He is armed with an 16GB thumbdrive and two cellphones.

Selling this book – *KORA: stories and poems* – and publishing articles in magazines and newspapers is today his only means of livelihood. *KORA* has sold 20,000 copies in the seven editions in English, and translations are published in French, Polish and Malayalam. And now TibetWrites is happy to bring out this eighth edition.

KORA is a powerful collection of creative writing which Tsundue produced over a decade, thus striking a perfect balance between the Writer and the Activist. We hope that his readers will not only enjoy the immediacy of his writing, through which Tsundue conveys the agonizing reality of a displaced people, but will also be inspired to reflect and thereby join the global spirit of support for Tibet so that the refugees can one day reunite with their brethren in a free Tibet.

The author is grateful to Bhuchung D. Sonam and Jane Perkins for their help in putting together this new edition, and to Tsundue's elder sister, Choney Wangmo, who is for the third time contributing to the publication of this book after funding the first edition in 2002. Tsundue's former classmate Tenzin Choegyal, who has now become a popular Tibetan singer in Australia, has supported this new edition of *Kora*. The author extends gratitude for the contribution.

TibetWrites
Dharamsala

Dedication

My forehead at

thy feet

I bow to thee

the freedom fighters of Tibet

who never gave up

on their dreams.

HORIZON

From home you have reached
the Horizon here.
From here to another
here you go.

From there to the next
next to the next
horizon to horizon
every step is a horizon.

Count the steps
and keep the number.

Pick the white pebbles
and the funny strange leaves.
Mark the curves
and cliffs around
for you may need
to come home again.



LOSAR GREETING

Tashi Delek!

Though in a borrowed garden
you grow, grow well my sister.

This Losar
when you attend your Morning Mass,
say an extra prayer
that the next Losar
we can celebrate back in Lhasa.

When you attend your convent classes,
learn an extra lesson
that you can teach children back in Tibet.

Last year
on our Happy Losar,
I had an *idli-sambhar* breakfast
and wrote my BA final exams.
My *idlis* wouldn't stand
on my toothed steely fork,
but I wrote my exams well.

Though in a borrowed garden
you grow, grow well my sister.

Send your roots
through the bricks,
stones, tiles and sand.
Spread your branches wide
and rise
above the hedges high.

Tashi Delek!



Tashi Delek – a Tibetan greeting said especially at the New Year

Losar – Tibetan New Year usually falling in February or March of the Gregorian calendar

Idli-sambar – A South Indian rice cake dish

A PERSONAL RECONNAISSANCE

From Ladakh
Tibet is just a gaze away.
They said
from that black knoll
at Dumtse it's Tibet.
For the first time,
I saw my country.

In a hurried hidden trip
I was there at the mound.

I sniffed the soil,
scratched the ground,
listened to the dry wind
and the wild old cranes.

I didn't see the border,
I swear there wasn't anything
different, there.

I didn't know
if I was there or here.
I didn't know
if I was here or there.

They say the kyang
come here every winter.
They say the kyang
go there every summer.



Kyang – wild ass found in herds in the *Changthang*
(northern plains) of Tibet and Ladakh

DESPERATE AGE

Kill my Dalai Lama
that I can believe no more.

Bury my head
beat it.
Disrobe me
chain it.
But don't let me free.

Within the prison
this body is yours.
But within the body
my belief is only mine.

You want to do it?
Kill me here – silently.
Make sure no breath remains.
But don't let me free.

If you want, do it again.
Right from the beginning:
Discipline me
Re-educate me
Indoctrinate me
Show me your communist gimmicks.
But don't let me free.

Kill my Dalai Lama
and I will
believe no more.



MY TIBETANNESS

Thirty-nine years in exile.
Yet no nation supports us.
Not a single bloody nation!

We are refugees here.
People of a lost country.
Citizen to no nation.

Tibetans: the world's sympathy stock.
Serene monks and bubbly traditionalists;
one lakh and several thousand odd,
nicely mixed, steeped
in various assimilating cultural hegemonies.

At every check-post and office
I am an "Indian-Tibetan".
My Registration Certificate
I renew every year with a *salaam*.
A foreigner born in India.

I am more of an Indian.
Except for my chinky Tibetan face.
"Nepali?" "Thai?" "Japanese?"
"Chinese?" "Naga?" "Manipuri?"
but never the question – "Tibetan?"

I am Tibetan.
But I am not from Tibet.
Never been there.
Yet I dream
of dying there.



REFUGEE

When I was born
 My mother said
 you are a refugee.
 Our tent on the roadside
 smoked in the snow.

On your forehead
 between your eyebrows
 there is an R embossed
 my teacher said.

I scratched and scrubbed,
 on my forehead I found
 a brash of red pain.

I am born refugee.

I have three tongues.
 The one that sings
 is my mother tongue.

The R on my forehead
 between my English and Hindi
 the Tibetan tongue reads:

RANGZEN



Freedom means Rangzen

space-bar
 A PROPOSAL

pull your ceiling half-way down
 and you can create a mezzanine for me

your walls open into cupboards
 is there an empty shelf for me?

let me grow in your garden
 with your roses and prickly pears

i'll sleep under your bed
 and watch TV in the mirror

do you have an ear on your balcony?
 i am singing from your window

open your door
 let me in

i am resting at your doorstep
 call me when you are awake



THE TIBETAN IN MUMBAI

The Tibetan in Mumbai
is not a foreigner.

He is a cook
at a Chinese takeaway.
They think he is a Chinese
run away from Beijing.

He sells sweaters in summer
in the shade of the Parel Bridge.
They think he is some retired Bahadur.

The Tibetan in Mumbai
abuses in Bambaya Hindi,
with a slight Tibetan accent
and during vocabulary emergencies
he naturally runs into Tibetan.
That's when the Parsis laugh.

The Tibetan in Mumbai
likes to flip through the MID-DAY,
loves FM, but doesn't expect
a Tibetan song.

He catches the bus at a signal,
jumps into a running train,
walks into a long dark gully,
and nestles in his *kholi*.

He gets angry
when they laugh at him
'ching-chong ping-pong.'

The Tibetan in Mumbai
is now tired,
wants some sleep and a dream.

On the 11pm Virar Fast,
he goes to the Himalayas.

The 8.05am Fast Local
brings him back to Churchgate
into the Metro: a New Empire.



Mid-Day — a popular Mumbai daily newspaper
Kholi — Mumbai slang for a shack

I am tired,
I am tired doing that 10th March ritual,
screaming from the hills of Dharamsala.

I am tired,
I am tired selling sweaters on the roadside,
40 years of sitting
in dust and spit.

I am tired,
eating rice 'n dal
and grazing cows in the jungles of Karnataka.

I am tired dragging my *dhoti*
in the dirt of Manju Tila.

I am tired fighting for the country
I have never seen.



Dhoti – sarong-like garment worn by men in India
Manju Tila – Tibetan colony in Delhi called Majnu-ka-Tilla

BETRAYAL

My father died
defending our home,
our village, our country.

I too wanted to fight.

But we are Buddhist.

People say we should be
peaceful and non-violent.

So I forgave my enemy.

But sometimes I feel

I betrayed my father.



I AM A TERRORIST

I am a terrorist.
I like to kill.

I have horns,
two fangs
and a dragonfly tail.

Chased away from my home,
hiding from fear,
saving my life,
doors slammed in my face,

justice constantly denied,
patience is tested
on television, battered
in front of the silent majority
pushed against the wall,
from that dead end
I have returned.

I am the humiliation
you gulped down
with flattened nose.

I am the shame
you buried in darkness.

I am a terrorist.
Shoot me down.

Cowardice and fear
I left behind
in the valley
among the meowly cats
and lapping dogs.
I am single,
I have nothing
to lose.

I am a bullet.
I do not think.

From the tin shell
I leap for that thrilling
2 - second life
and die with the dead.

I am the life
you left behind.



WHEN IT RAINS IN DHARAMSALA

When it rains in Dharamsala
raindrops wear boxing gloves,
thousands of them
come crashing down
and beat my room.
Under its tin roof
my room cries from inside
and wets my bed, my papers.

Sometimes the clever rain comes
from behind my room,
the treacherous walls lift
their heels and allow
a small flood into my room.

I sit on my island-nation bed
and watch my country in flood,
notes on freedom,
memoirs of my prison days,
letters from college friends,
crumbs of bread
and Maggi noodles
rise sprightly to the surface
like a sudden recovery
of a forgotten memory.

Three months of torture,
monsoon in the needle-leaved pines
Himalaya rinsed clean
glistens in the evening sun.

Until the rain calms down
and stops beating my room

I need to console my tin roof
who has been on duty
from the British Raj.
This room has sheltered
many homeless people.

Now captured by mongooses
and mice, lizards and spiders,
and partly rented by me.
A rented room for home
is a humbling existence.

My Kashmiri landlady
at eighty cannot return home.
We often compete for beauty
Kashmir or Tibet.

Every evening
I return to my rented room.
But I am not going to die this way.
There has got to be
some way out of here.
I cannot cry like my room.
I have cried enough
in prisons and
in small moments of despair.

There has got to be
some way out of here.
I cannot cry,
my room is wet enough.



PEDRO'S FLUTE

Pedro, Pedro

What do you have in your flute?
Is there a little boy who lost his mother
and is running all around the town
bare feet slapping the wet cobblestone?

Pedro, Pedro

Tell me what do you have in your flute?
Is that a soft moaning
of a young girl, pregnant at 16
thrown out of her house
now living in the public park
behind the toilets?

Wonder how you blow
a stump of a plastic pipe
and how it comes alive into a flute
a flute with no eye or ear or mouth
whistling,
now crying, now singing
whistles that turn into small needle arrows
arrows that sting
sting even the hearts of the owls
owls who have hair in their ears.

Pedro, Pedro

Tell me what do you have in your flute?
Is that whistle in the hinges of the window
the cry of the young girl?
Or is that the breathing of the little boy
who is now tired and sleeping
at the police station?

Pedro, Pedro

Tell me what do you have in your flute?



EXILE HOUSE

Our tiled roof dripped
and the four walls threatened to fall apart
but we were to go home soon.

We grew papayas
in front of our house
chillies in our garden
and changmas for our fences,
then pumpkins rolled down the cowshed thatch
calves trotted out of the manger.

Grass on the roof,
beans sprouted and
climbed the vines,
money plants crept in through the window,
our house seems to have grown roots.

The fences have grown into a jungle,
now how can I tell my children
where we came from?



Changma (Tibetan) – a tree usually planted for fences; flexible and flourishing

MY KIND OF EXILE

*I am more of an Indian.
Except for my chinky Tibetan face'*

Ask me where I'm from and I won't have an answer. I feel I never really belonged anywhere, never really had a home. I was born in Manali, but my parents live in Karnataka. Finishing my schooling in two different schools in Himachal Pradesh, my further studies took me to Madras, Ladakh and Mumbai. My sisters are in Varanasi but my brothers are in Dharamsala. My Registration Certificate (my permit to stay in India) states that I'm a foreigner residing in India and my citizenship is Tibetan. But Tibet as a nation does not feature anywhere on the world political map. I like to speak in Tibetan, but prefer to write in English, I like to sing in Hindi but my tune and accent are all wrong. Every once in a while, someone walks up and demands to know where I come from... My defiant answer "Tibetan" raises more than just their eyebrows... I'm bombarded with questions and statements and doubts and sympathy. But none of them can ever empathise with the plain simple fact that I have nowhere to call home and in the world at large all I'll ever be is a 'political refugee'.

When we were children in a Tibetan school in Himachal Pradesh, our teachers used to regale us with tales of Tibetans suffering in Tibet. We were often told that we were refugees and that we all bore a big 'R' on our foreheads. It didn't make much sense to us, we only wished the teacher would hurry up and finish his talk and not keep us standing in the hot sun, with our oiled hair. For a very long time I sincerely believed that we were a special kind of people with an 'R' on our foreheads. We did look different from the local Indian families who lived around our school campus; the butcher family who killed twenty-one sheep and goats every morning (when the goats bleated with half-cut throat from behind the slaughterhouse, we used to throw stones at the tin roof). There were five other families who lived nearby; they owned apple orchards and seemed to eat only apples in different forms! In school we never saw many people other than ourselves and a few *Injis* (westerners),

who visited from time to time. Perhaps the first thing I learned at school was that we were refugees and we didn't belong to this country.

I am still to read Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*. When she spoke about her book in a magazine, she said that her exile grew with her and that seems to be happening with me too. From the whole gamut of recent Hindi films, I was eagerly waiting for one particular film, *Refugee*, produced and directed by JP Dutta. There is a scene in the movie that so eloquently puts forth our plight – a father had brought his family from across the border into the neighbouring country and is living far from comfortably but is a survivor. Events follow one after another and there comes a scene where the authorities hold him captive and question his identity. He breaks down: "*Wahan hamara jena mushkil ho gaya tha, isiliye hum yahan aye, ab yahan bhi... Kya Refugee hona gunah hain?*" (It had become difficult for us to live there. So we had to come here. Now here too... Is it a crime to be refugee?) The army officer is dumbfounded.

A few months ago a group of Tibetans in New York, mostly youngsters, found themselves in a difficult situation. A Tibetan youth had died and nobody in the group knew the cremation rites. All of them stared at each other. Suddenly they found themselves too far away from home.

*'...and meanwhile through the years
our unburied dead eat with us
followed behind through bedroom doors.'*

-Abena PA Busia

Tibetan refugees, like other immigrants from Asia to the West, work hard to earn a living in that highly mechanised and competitive environment. An old man was thus very happy when he got a job that would pay him enough so he wouldn't be a burden on his family's scarce resources. He was put in charge of pressing a button whenever there was a beep. He found it amusing doing that trivial thing throughout the day. He sat there all day with a rosary in his hand, softly murmuring his prayers. Of course, he pressed the button religiously whenever there was

the beep (forgive him, oh lord, for he knew not what he was doing). A few days later, out of curiosity, he asked his co-worker what the button was for. He was told that every time he pressed the button, he cut the neck of a chicken. He immediately left the job.

In October 2000 the world was tuned in to the Sydney Olympics. In the hostel, on D-day we were all glued to the TV set eager for the opening ceremony to begin. Halfway into the event I realised that I couldn't see clearly anymore and my face felt wet. I was crying. No, it wasn't the fact that I dearly wished I was in Sydney, or the splendour of the atmosphere, or the spirit of the games. I tried hard to explain to those around me. But they couldn't understand, couldn't even begin to understand... how could they? They belong to a nation. They have never had to conceive of its loss, they have never had to cry for their country. They belonged and had a space of their own, not only on the world map but also in the Olympic Games. Their countrymen could march proudly, confident of their nationality, in their national dress and with their national flag flying high. I was so happy for them.

Night comes down, but your stars are missing'

Neruda spoke for me when I was silent, drowned in tears. Quietly watching the rest of the show I was heavy and breathless. They talked about borderlessness and building brotherhood through the spirit of sports. From the comfort of home they talked about coming together for one humanity and defying borders. What can I, a refugee, talk about except the wish to go back home?

Home for me is real. It is there, but I am very far from it. It is the home my grandparents and parents left behind in Tibet. It is the valley in which my Popo-la and Momo-la had their farm and lots of yaks, where my parents played when they were children. My parents now live in a refugee camp in Karnataka. They are given a house and land to till. They grow maize, their annual yield. I visit them once every couple of years for a short vacation. During my stay, I often ask them about our home in Tibet. They tell me of that fateful day, when they were playing in the lush green pastures of the Changtang, while grazing their

yaks and sheep, how they had to pack up and flee the village. Everyone was leaving the village and there was hushed talk that the Chinese were killing everybody on their way in. Monasteries were being bombed, robbery rampant, everything was in chaos. Smoke could be seen from distant villages and there were screams in the mountains. When they actually left their village they had to trek through the Himalayas and then to India, and they were only children. It was exciting but it was fearful too.

In India, they worked as mountain road construction labourers in Masumari, Bir, Kullu, and Manali. The world's highest stretch of metalled road, running hundreds of kilometers from Manali to Ladakh, was built by the Tibetans. My parents tell me that hundreds of Tibetans who came across into India died in those first few months. They could not bear the heat of summer, and the monsoon caught them in poor health. But the camp lived on and had many shifts along the road. Somewhere along that journey, at a roadside, I was born in a makeshift tent. "Who had time to record a child's birth when everyone was tired and hungry?" my mother says when I ask for my birthday. It was only when I was admitted into a school that I was given a date of birth. At three different offices three different records were made, now I have three dates of birth. I have never celebrated my birthday.

The monsoon is welcome to our farm, but not to our house. The forty-year-old tiled roof drips, and in the house we get to work planting vessels and buckets, spoons and glasses, collecting the bounty of the rain gods, while Pa-la climbs onto the roof trying to fill the gaps and replace the broken tiles. Pa-la never thinks about revamping the whole roof using some good asbestos sheets. He says, "Soon we will go back to Tibet. There we have our own home." Our cowshed has seen some repairs; the thatch is re-laid annually and old worm-infested wooden poles and frames are replaced.

When the Tibetans first settled in Karnataka, they decided to grow only papayas and some vegetables. They said that, with the blessings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, it wouldn't take more than ten years to return to Tibet. But now even the guava trees are old and withered. The mango seeds they dumped in the back yard are bearing fruits. Coconut

trees are brushing shoulders with our exile house. Old folks bask in the sun drinking chang or butter tea, chatting about the good old days in Tibet with their prayer wheels in their hands, while the youngsters are scattered all over the world, studying, working. This waiting seems to be redefining eternity.

*'money plants crept in through the window,
our house seems to have grown roots,
the fences have grown into a jungle,
now how can I tell my children
where we came from?'*

I recently met a friend of mine, Dawa, in Dharamsala. He had escaped to India a couple of years ago after being freed from a Chinese prison. He spoke to me about his prison experiences. His brother, a monk, was arrested for putting up 'Free Tibet' posters and, when tortured in prison, it was he who spilled the beans on Dawa. Dawa was imprisoned without trial for four hundred and twenty two days. He was then only twenty-six. Dawa had been working under Chinese bureaucracy for quite some time. He was taken to Beijing from Tibet for formal education early in life and still he laughs at China's feeble efforts to indoctrinate their ideas and beliefs of Communism and its way of life on Tibetans. Thankfully, in his case the Chinese efforts didn't bear fruit.

Two years ago, a close school-friend received a letter that put him in the most difficult situation of his life. The letter, from his uncle, said that his parents, who were in Tibet, had got permission for a pilgrimage to Nepal for two months. Tashi, after collecting his brother from Dharamsala, went to Nepal to meet their parents whom they had not seen since their escape to India twenty years ago. Before leaving, Tashi wrote to me, 'Tsundue, I don't know whether I should rejoice that I am finally going to meet my parents or cry because I can't remember how my parents looked... I was only a child when I was sent to India with my uncle, and it's twenty years now.' Recently, he received another letter from his uncle in Nepal. It said that his mother had passed away in Tibet a month ago.

I saw the Germans shed tears of joy when broken families from the East and the West finally met and hugged each other over the broken wall. The Koreans are brimming with tears of joy as the border that divided their country into North and South is finally melting. I fear the broken families of Tibet will never rejoin. My grandparents' brothers and sisters were left behind in Tibet. My Popo-la passed away a few years ago; will my Momo-la ever get to see her brothers and sisters again? Will we be together there so that she can show me our home and our farm?



Note – This essay won the Outlook-Picador Non-Fiction Competition 2001. The judges said they picked it for *"the touching simplicity with which the writer explains the tragedy of being a Tibetan in this world, and, in a way, the pain of all refugees across the world."*

First published in *Outlook* magazine

WHY I'LL CLIMB MORE SCAFFOLDING AND TOWERS

Once, as a child, my parents left me with my grandparents while they went for a movie to the next village. They said I wouldn't be able to walk back home in the night. So I broke the family water pot. My intention was that of a protest rather than to create a swamp in the kitchen.

Last month Zhu Rongji, Premier of the People's Republic of China, visited India. For me the Big Brother of my enemy country had come strolling nearby. I wanted to tell him in his face "Get out of my country", and the best way to do that was to scream. I climbed the scaffolding and reached the 14th floor of the Oberoi Towers where Zhu was addressing a conference of Indian diplomats and business tycoons. From there I unfurled the Tibetan National Flag, a red banner which read 'FREE TIBET', flung in the air 500 leaflets reasoning why the protest, and shouted slogans. In no time, curtains were raised and every window on the entire floor had Chinese faces looking at me. I was proud to wave the Tibetan National flag at them. That one moment is worth it all. Luckily I dropped the idea to slap Zhu in the conference room. Later I wrote this while in police custody:

*'He was tall
arms akimbo
like the Everest
I climbed the Everest
and I was taller
my hands free'*

The police were sympathetic to the cause. More so for their benefit. They knew that once Tibet becomes Independent they needn't bother about difficult protesters like me and the one lakh Tibetan refugees would go back to Tibet. With that, a better promise is that the Indian border along the Himalayas will be safe. It was only after the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1949 that India came to share borders with China for the first time in history. One police officer said, "We

must work together."

The Tibetan freedom struggle in exile has been more symbolic than confrontational as in Tibet. In the past forty years all we have been able to achieve is presenting the real Tibet as a country where real people of flesh and blood live with the same capacity to feel pain and anger. We have been able to demystify Tibet from the clichéd notion of Tibet as Shangri-La, where lamas walk two inches off the ground.

But the freedom struggle seems to have stopped growing from the zenith of sympathy we reached when His Holiness the Dalai Lama received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1989. Ever since the Tibetan Government-in-Exile started dealing with China from 1979, the Tibetan freedom struggle stopped being a mass movement. Unless it becomes a powerful mass movement, I don't believe the exile government can regain freedom for Tibet – dreaming of dialogue with China. It's been thirty years, and all we received is a set of unacceptable pre-conditions "to consider for talks."

My friends who came from Tibet recently say that it is hard to find trustworthy friends in Tibet these days. Every other person may be an informer for the Chinese. They whisk away activists in the cover of night and their dead bodies resurface on the outskirts of town. Some are beaten to paralysis. Any attempt to ask for basic human rights is synonymous with attempting suicide. Tibetans are a minority in their own country. A cloud of terror and oppression looms large over Tibet.

Now, two railway lines are being laid from northeastern Tibet to Lhasa. This will flood Tibet with Chinese and they will drain the resources; the roof of the world will totter under its ecological imbalance. Soon the Ganga, Brahmaputra, Indus, Yangtze and Mekong will flow with blood and corpses. The heavy build-up of arms and nuclear missile bases in Tibet couldn't have been conceived in Beijing to use against unarmed Tibetans.

A general apathy over Tibet and this non-action 'non-violent freedom struggle' is slowly killing the movement. Though exotic Tibet sells in the West, there are hardly any takers when it comes to tackling the

real issue. The issue is Independence!

As I write this page, I hear that His Holiness the Dalai Lama has called off the Kalachakra religious festival due to his ill health. I am happy that more than one lakh Tibetans have been disappointed. Suddenly the centre moved, the periphery is unsettled and now they have to readjust. For many it is a wake-up call to a worse situation lurking ahead.

The next twenty years is a crucial period for Tibet. This will see the fate of Tibet decided: life or death. Once the centre disappears the periphery will be thrown into chaos. The 'non-violent and peaceful Tibetans' will make one last desperate act to survive as a people, as a civilization. How violent will it be?

The very nature of the Tibetan problem is political, and it has to have a political solution. We are grateful to India for whatever help and support she extended to us, but if the Tibetan problem has to be solved she should support the freedom struggle.

Yesterday India fell for China when Mao Zedong came with 'friendship ties', screaming "*Hindi-Chini-Bhai-Bhai*," but later they backstabbed India in 1962. Prime Minister Nehru couldn't withstand the shock. Today Zhu Rongji is extending 'economic ties', screaming "*Hindi-Buy-Buy-Chini*".

We have known the Chinese for long as a difficult neighbour. We know we are fighting a losing battle, with the world given up on us. We may perish, but for India it will leave a cancerous wound along its 3,500 km permanent border with China.

Will India wake up to this reality? It is time we worked together for the Independence of Tibet and for a safe and secure border for India.

Dharamsala, March 2002



KORA full circle

A fly sat on a crumb of cow dung being carried away by the rainwater flowing down the street. The streamlet took it to the end of the village where a stupa stood. The streamlet then went around the holy structure taking the fly on a circumambulation and finally joined into a nearby tributary. The fly was born into a human being in its next life, blessed with an opportunity to hear the words of the Buddha. Thus a scripture says.

Dharamsala. Late December. It has been snowing for a few days now. There's a chill in the air even though it's a sunny afternoon today. The sun has just peeped out from behind the clouds at McLeod Ganj when Tashi steps out into the street.

Bored of staying at home, he has come out for walk. His languid stroll takes him to the end of the row of shops and stalls. There he bumps into Nyima (wearing an old blazer), shakes his hand, and Tashi says, "Hi Nyima-la!"

Nyima, in reply, asks him "*Lingkhör do gya?*" (Want to go for a circumambulation?)

Tashi replies "*Do Ki Menke!*" (No man).

He strolls into the McLeod Ganj streets, blissfully oblivious to the mass of different wares on sale, the cosmopolitan crowd, names of shops in English, Hindi, Tibetan, Punjabi, Tibetan music in the background as well as the natural sounds of a bustling small town that was Dharamsala. Tashi couldn't have been more than twenty-five years old. He has an attitude typical of his age that shines on his face. He is a graduate, but still without a solid hold over his career. Today he is wearing blue jeans and a black and red striped jacket. The dirt and wispy patches and drawings on his jeans show that his parents aren't at home.

Tashi was just setting foot onto the temple road when an Old Man passes by. Tashi checks his watch, looks back into the street, and

continues to move on. He studies a vacant spot above a grocery store near Namgyal Monastery, meets Jampa there, inquires about Ngodup and Salman. Jampa was waiting for his girlfriend, Dolma. Today the teashop where they usually play carom is shut. This is turning into a particularly boring day Tashi thinks. He walks down the slope. Soon he was entering the Lingkhör path.

A strip of coal-tar path goes winding into the woods; pines, spruce, oaks and rhododendrons stand among the bushes. The narrow path goes around the green hill at its waist like a belt. On the top of the hill is the residence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, his exile house. People walk clockwise around the Lingkhör, just as they used to do around the Potala years back in Lhasa.

Tashi is now enjoying the warm afternoon sun. And from the Lingkhör path he sees the plains of the Kangra Valley laid open in front of him like the lines on his palm. Behind him stands the Dhauladhar range, snow-covered peaks standing shoulder-to-shoulder against the blue sky painted with balls of swift white clouds. There are patches of snow on the roadside as he walks. He passes by a heap of carved slates, rocks carved with OM MANI PADME HUM painted in the five elemental colours: blue, white, red, green and yellow.

When Tashi comes to the mani-engraver he stops to look at the craftsman in action. He watches a full 'OM' being carved on a slate. There was a strange satisfaction on his face when the stone engraver sighed at the finishing of that sacred inscription. The old engraver glances back to acknowledge the presence of his young audience. "Isn't it cold, po-la?" Tashi asks, releasing a cloud of vapour with his words. Letting his chisel and little mallet fall to the ground, the engraver replies, "In Tibet, it snows as high as your height," raising his left hand in the air in an attempt to indicate a great height. He then picks up his tools again. Without a word Tashi resumes his stroll. The old engraver, looking concerned, watches Tashi as he walks away.

A little way further, he sees the Old Man who had passed by him in McLeod Ganj, moving slowly aided by a walking stick. He is bent slightly from the waist, but his gait is that of a healthy man with a

strong persistent will. His chuba is of black nambu and goes well with the pair of zompa that he's wearing. In his left hand he carries a prayer wheel, because of which he seems to be covering the whole breadth of the tiny Lingkhör path. Tashi, without the knowledge of the Old Man, was trying to gain a little space in the path from behind and overtake him. He tries from the left, but stops because he might hit the Old Man's prayer wheel. He tries from the right, but the Old Man's walking stick looks too unsteady whenever it hits the narrow tar road.

Tashi sees the path running over a drain. He quickly moves to the left and without disturbing the Old Man he zips past him. The Old Man immediately quips: "In a hurry young man?" Tashi turns to look back and then, without a word, continues to walk ahead. The Old Man stops by a mound of manis and says some prayers, closing his eyes. He could be anywhere around sixty to seventy years old. There are ravines of wrinkles on the Old Man's face. His white and grey hair, plaited into two, buries into his woollen skullcap. A small photograph of the Dalai Lama is pinned on the cap. His rosary hangs from his neck when he bends forward to touch his forehead to the painted image of a deity on a huge rock on the wayside.

After a sharp turn in the path he sees the young man taking a rest at the roadside. The Old Man looks at his face and teases: "Tired already? It's a long way to go young man." After a thought he says, almost in an abusive tone, "The youngsters these days are good for nothing, whiling away their time and their parents' money." Tashi doesn't like it and wants to answer. He gets up slowly and walks close behind the Old Man.

Very irritated and angry with his critic, Tashi spews out the first thing that comes to his mind – "You were the people who gave away our country into the hands of the Chinese!" He peers into the Old Man's face. Tashi had just wanted to blurt it out of anger but not really with the intention of hurting the Old Man. The Old Man, on his part is composed but looks very hurt. He stops in the middle of the path. Tashi, because he is following close behind, is forced to stop too. The Old Man studies Tashi's face, pictured against the snow mountains, cold and shimmering, and says, "If my son had been alive he would have been older

than you. But he died fighting the Chinese. He died in my lap." The Old Man thumbs his chest. "It's a long story. You tell me what you have done for Tibet up to now?" The Old Man asks in a stern, interrogating tone.

Tashi, in his turn, boasts of the Tibet campaigns he organized in college with his Indian friends. He gives examples of protest rallies he has taken part in, exhibitions of Tibetan culture he's organized, hunger strikes he's sat for, but after a while he feels he's sounding a little hollow in front of the Old Man. There's a long, uneasy silence between them. Tashi looks at the two men facing each other in the late afternoon shadow fallen on the pebbles on the roadside. Then he asks, "Which part of Kham are you from?" Tashi guesses correctly that the Old Man is from Kham from his accent.

The Old Man is now walking step-by-step, narrating stories of how the Chinese first came into Tibet. Thus, deep in conversation the two men enter the Lhagyal Ri area. They are so immersed in each other that they almost become a part of the entire Lingkhör structure; stupas, prayer flags, lines of prayer wheels and other devotees walking, and the storytelling continues with the distinct voice of the Old Man ringing loud and clear. They follow one another in setting the lines of prayer wheels installed on the wall spinning. There are other people prostrating at the stupas, tying colourful prayer flags to the trees. Some old folks are sitting in the rain shelter doing their prayers.

As the two men climb the steps towards the Palden Lhamo stupa there is no conversation. In front of the locked window, wherein the protector deity is kept, they stand straight. Their faces look serene – eyes shut in deep reverence and prayer, their hands folded at the chest. Tashi always has fewer prayers to say and is faster at prostrations than the Old Man, finishes first but stands aside and waits for the Old Man to finish.

They climb down from the Palden Lhamo stupa together against a backdrop of a maze of prayer flags criss-crossing on the hill behind them. Tashi watches the unsteady steps of the Old Man but doesn't obviously extend his hand to support him. The Old Man is narrating yet another incident, but he only says one word for one step.

As they walk past another line of prayer wheels on the right side, the Old Man is heard saying: "I was near a river quenching my thirst with my son and fellow warriors with their horses. That day," he demonstrates by raising his finger with the walking stick, "We killed ten Chinese, left many of them badly wounded begging for mercy, and we looted enough food and ammunition to last for two weeks. Our informer said that a small group of Chinese were stationed behind the hill, waiting to get united into a bigger group of the Chinese army the next day.

"That night," he continues his narration, "we rode for some time, and as we approached the camp from a distance, we trotted." The Old Man is now riding his walking stick; there is temper in his voice and his face glows while trying to recreate the drama to this young man. "We crept," he said bending onto his knees, directing Tashi to duck. They are now climbing a small slope west of the Lingkhör. The Old Man is gasping with excitement having to climb the slope on his walking stick, sweating profusely.

As they near the top of the slope they are bathed in the light of the setting sun. The Old Man in his narration has now reached the door of the Chinese hideout. He takes off his skull cap and asks Tashi to hold it, his prayer wheel too. He now has his walking stick across his waist as a sword. Then he screams, "KI HE HE! We entered" the Old Man informs Tashi as an aside. He raises his sword high up in the sky, against the snow peaks, and brings it down in a slash, and immediately crosses it with another sharp slash slanted towards the wayside bush. In his next move, he lunges it at Tashi. Still holding the stick against Tashi's chest, he says, "We killed rampantly."

The Old Man's braided hair has come undone in the front, and stray strands cover his forehead and he looks every bit the fearsome warrior, perspiring and gasping. "Once the dust settled I found my son lying down in the next room. His stomach had been ripped open and he was holding his entrails in his hands. I supported him in my lap, but he had only the last breath left in him. Three Chinese soldiers lay dead beside him."

The Old Man took back his prayer wheel and the cap from Tashi without saying a word. The sword had gone back to pointing towards the ground, supporting the Old Man in his walk. There is a little unsteadiness in the Old Man. Yet he continues, "When the American agents withdrew their support, everything went haywire." He is now walking slowly, adjusting his cap, tossing his locks of hair to the back. Silence accompanies them to a nearby whitewashed mound of mani stones.

The Old Man sits on a rock by the wayside, and Tashi sits next to him. They are now in the full glow of the absolute orange of the evening sky. The Old Man slumps his prayer wheel in his lap. They form a distinct cut-out silhouette against the sky. The Old Man declares: "We never gave up. We would have slit our throats if we had been captured by the Chinese." Tashi listens closely to his old master. "Live one day, but with dignity and freedom" the Old Man advises, with one hand akimbo, and the other holding his stick. The walking stick stands tall.

The young man, mellowed like a ripe mango, listens. The Old Man continues to talk to Tashi with a voice full of expectations, like that of a father speaking to his son and asking him to keep up the struggle. Tashi grips the Old Man's hands and the strength in his grip comforts the Old Man. The Old Man is not finished yet. He admonishes Tashi. "That's not how you do it," he says. He commands Tashi to get up. "We touch our foreheads and say prayers. That's the way it is done." The Old Man sensing the hesitation in Tashi says, "May you complete the work left incomplete. May you be successful in the struggle and take His Holiness the Dalai Lama back to a free Tibet."

The Old Man says his prayers turning towards the Dalai Lama's residence. His forehead bends to the prayer wheel he is holding in his folded hands. As he says his prayers in the last of the twilight, Tashi moves away, slowly vanishing into the cold evening.



Note – Originally written as a film script.

MY MUMBAI STORY

I came to Mumbai to run away from the Tibetan community. In 1997 I had gone to Tibet without papers and was arrested by the Chinese border police. After three months of beatings, humiliation and mental torture in prison I was then thrown out of Tibet. Instead of supporting me, my relatives back in India nagged and scolded me for not informing them before going. They yelled at me that I put them through a lot of mental stress – not understanding what I was experiencing having survived police brutality and interrogation for months in jail.

Mumbai is not a typical Tibetan joint. There are little more than thirty Tibetans living in the city doing odd jobs like working in restaurants, manufacturing noodles and now youngsters in IT jobs. During winter, about two hundred Tibetans come down to the city to sell sweaters; after two months' stay, like migratory birds they return to their refugee camps to celebrate Losar, the Tibetan New Year of the lunar calendar which falls around February. The arrival of Tibetan sweater-sellers in Mumbai is seen as the announcement of winter to the city, which otherwise has only two seasons - summer and the rainy season.

When I come down to Bombay, Rani Mukherjee smiles at me from big film promotion hoardings. For ordinary Tibetans Bombay is the dream-like legendary city they saw in Amitabh Bachchan films; big city, big money with a lot of *goondas*. It's also known for Bollywood actors, so I'm often asked to bring real photos of Aamir Khan and Aishwarya Rai for them. Average Tibetans still don't understand the fuss about calling the city Mumbai. So today Tibetans pronounce it with a Middle Way-approach – 'Mumbay'.

The first Tibetans came when it was still Bombay, in the early 1950s, when Tibet was also an independent country. The Tibetans settled in Darjeeling and Kalimpong used to frequent their nearby port city, Calcutta. But three Tibetan families came to Bombay along with Chinese who had run away from China after the 1949 communist revolution. They were friends in noodle businesses.

Even today, some of the best restaurants and hotels in Mumbai

take noodle supplies from the city's small Tibetan noodle factories. Around twenty youngsters work as cooks in 'Chinese' restaurants. Kunga, forty, who has trained about thirty Tibetan youngsters in this trade, was once answering a journalist on this apparent political contradiction. His explanation, "Cooking is a skill, whether it's Tibetan, Chinese or South Indian".

There is this legendary anecdote about the first Tibetans who came to Bombay. The story says that a group of them took seats in the upper storey of a double decker bus. The bus started roaring and was about to move. Just then the whole bunch of Tibetans came rushing downstairs. The conductor asked what was the matter. They all shouted in unison, "There's no driver up there but the bus is moving." Whether this story is true or not I don't know, but it circulates among Tibetans to this day. And it does go to prove that Tibetans are observant and make doubly sure of matters.

In the cosmopolitan city that is Mumbai it's such a joy to talk and laugh in Tibetan. On rare occasions like the birthday of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the few Tibetans living in Mumbai would gather for singing, dancing and good Tibetan food. Somebody would break into a mountain song to a background of traffic noise and Bollywood film music blaring from the nearby *chawl*. We take our Tibetan guests to Marine Drive to show the expanse of the sea, while we train new arrivals joining us to live in the city on the Mumbai local trains during rush hours.

As well as running away, I came here to do my further studies. Along with reading literature and philosophy at Bombay University's Kalina Campus, it was here I started writing. I began to meet established writers and artists like Dom Moraes, Nissim Ezekiel, Adil Jussawala and Arun Kolhatkar and got inspired by their art and how they dealt with it. I also learned much about stage performances, fine arts and the business of exhibitions, the inside stories of film-making and about media relations.

It was during those years that I worked very hard. I had no place to stay because I had no money. I was camping out at friends'

places in Andheri, Borivli, Cuffe Parade, Santacruz and Amboli. Commuting to town from Borivli, fighting for a foothold on the Virar-Churchgate local train, was a daily challenge. Once I had a near-fatal fall in a rush hour, but was surprised to realize that I was fighting for the same foothold on the local train the very next day. I survived on *vada-pao* for days together, and ate peanuts at the Marine Drive promenade while writing lamentations in verse.

After an MA from Bombay University I published my first book of poems with the help of my classmates who chipped in to bear the cost. We later sold copies in colleges and at poetry reading sessions at Crossword, Prithvi Theatre, NCPA and the Poetry Circle. In 2001, I won the first Outlook-Picador an all-India essay contest; since I was then living in Mumbai the media reported "Mumbai student wins essay contest". I was happy to be accepted as a Mumbaiite.

I was the only Tibetan on the university campus. I did miss the company of Tibetans, but I made many Indian friends. In fact, today, I have more Indian friends than Tibetans. I now live up here in the Himalayas, at the hill station called Dharamsala, the place where His Holiness the Dalai Lama calls home. I come to Mumbai for a variety of Tibet-related work and whenever I come down I have a host of friends to meet. I can stay and eat in any place in Mumbai. I am very comfortable with the Mumbai mindscape, language, culture and the *chalta hai* attitude. Due to all this I feel at home in Mumbai.

Mumbai is sympathetic to the Tibet Issue. In 2002, when China's Prime Minister Zhu Rongji visited the city, I staged a protest by climbing up the scaffolding of the Oberoi Hotel (now the Hilton). From the 14th floor I hung a banner reading 'Free Tibet'. We received international media attention, but nothing like the front page coverage in Mumbai and then the public support. Suddenly Bombay made its mark on the map of the Tibetan freedom movement. I had to stay in Cuffe Parade police station till late that night, but personally that was my most memorable moment in Mumbai.

But without making the freedom movement strong from within the Tibetan community itself, no amount of outside support would

help. For that I needed to be working within the Tibetan community, so I moved out of Mumbai, though only physically. My dream is to free Tibet from the Chinese occupation and to rebuild our home there. Till then I may be anywhere, but I shall never have a home. Legally we are a stateless people, including even the Dalai Lama. Home has a very sacred meaning to me. Tomorrow, when we return to Tibet after our independence I will still return to *amchi* Mumbai.

Once I was carrying a letter from a friend to his old mother. I couldn't deliver the letter on the day of my arrival. Early next morning I was told by a friend that the mother died the previous night in her sleep. She was 79. She used to speak to us youngsters about her life in Tibet. I spent long hours listening to her life story. I kept on telling her that Tibet would soon be free and that we could all return home. We cremated her at the public crematorium at Chandan Wadi. The previous year we buried another old Tibetan, aged 80, at the Dadar burial ground.

We are quickly losing our elder generation who lived in Tibet, and witnessed the Chinese invasion, so soon there will be no one left among us who has seen free Tibet, who can tell us about life before the Chinese marched in. Till we regain our land we have to keep passing on our stories and songs while we are living in Mumbai – far from our mountain homes.

Dharamsala, January 2006



PROTEST AS CELEBRATION OF DIFFERENCE

A group of about two hundred Tibetans were arrested in 2002 while staging a surprise protest on the high streets of Mumbai when the then Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji visited the Indian business capital. The police station was found too small to house the Tibetan assembly and the jailers had never seen so many Tibetans together. So the jail inspector asked the protestors why they were arrested. Looking at this as a chance to verbalise their grief, the Tibetans explained how much suffering the Tibetans had to undergo because of Chinese occupation of Tibet. Then the jailer raised his *lathi* to beat up the Tibetans and said, "You say more than a million Tibetans have been killed, six thousand monasteries destroyed, thousands still in prison and for that all that you did was raise slogans? Is this a freedom struggle? Now I will beat you."

The worst thing for any victim is not the pain that one has undergone, but the knowledge that the culprit is still roaming free, and worse if the victim has to stand in silence while the culprit goes about in the crowd with a show of power. To be in a free country and allowing Chinese leaders to go unchallenged, allowing them to carry on their business as if everything is fine back in China and Tibet, is a DUTY not performed. We protest not because we hate Chinese, but because we want to speak to their conscience for their wrongdoing, and tell them we have not forgotten and that we still protest this, and also to tell the world of the injustice we are suffering at the hands of the brute and the bully, thereby seeking their support.

As the Chinese President Hu Jintao is visiting the US and Canada this month, and India early next month, Tibetans and Tibet supporters are in confusion on how to respond. While their hearts tell them to shout "Free Tibet" slogans, the exile government is making desperate appeals asking all Tibetans and supporters not to do so.

Some Tibet Support Groups have proposed a general adherence to the Kashag's request not to protest as a strategy to give China one last chance to respond to the Kashag's efforts to create a 'conductive sphere' for dialogue with China. It sounds like a call for a unified move,

but we must understand that we are united in our spirit to work for the benefit of Tibet; our ways of working are different. The 'One Cause One Slogan' of the 1960s is no longer possible. We have moved on.

Some Tibet Support Groups further say a general adherence to this call for silence during Hu Jintao's visit would strengthen His Holiness' credibility. If we talk of credibility there can be no bigger statement than the thousands of Tibetans in all regions of Tibet burning their tiger and leopard skin clothes after hearing a single word of His ethical advice.

The issue of Tibet is beyond the power and authority of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and this our leader himself has been saying from the beginning. Of course, we all have immense respect for him and I personally worship him as the Buddha that he is, but when it comes to the issue of Tibet I feel there is a lot of political and moral pressure on him; and seeking autonomy under China is not his first choice, but rather a pragmatic decision to deal with the situation. I know he is absolutely sincere in his decision-making.

The issue of Tibet is the issue of the Tibetan nation and its independence, the freedom of six million Tibetans, and now that the seeds of democracy that His Holiness sowed in 1960 have come of age, young people with independent, democratic minds no longer stay cowed down under social pressure to conform as they did in the 1960s and '70s. Today the only difference is in the political stance; tomorrow it may be the means. Therefore I feel China is wasting time to find safe solutions to the Tibet dilemma with the ageing of the Dalai Lama.

The exile Tibetan society has developed more acceptance of the variance in ideologies and perspectives, and this is a valid social development we have achieved by being in a free country and it is genuinely the strength of the Tibetan community in exile. The strength of the society lies not in blindly following a leader, but genuinely working for one's own political beliefs. This variation becomes both beauty and power.

Though the Tibetan Government-in-Exile has requested Tibetans and Tibet supporters to restrain from making anti-China protests

during the forthcoming Hu Jintao visit, and even had His Holiness making a similar request in his March 10 speech this year, it is only a request. It is up to each individual Tibetan to decide, and for each Tibet Support Group to do so. I feel just as they came as volunteers to support Tibet, they must continue to review their opinions and make independent decisions. TSGs are for Tibet, not for the policies of the exile government that change from time to time, according to the political needs. Our difference of opinion is only natural; there must be mutual respect. We must all celebrate the difference.

The Tibetans are not scattered but have spread all over the world. And from every corner of the world there should be free Tibet campaigns. We are not opposed in our opinions; we have a richness in variety and are exploring a hundred different ways to find the solution to Tibet. This is our might and competence.

Dharamsala, April 2006



'I am born refugee'

an interview with the author

Daily Star

13 DECEMBER 2003 BANGLADESH

LETTER FROM KATHMANDU

by Ajit Baral

Tibetan poet, writer and activist Tenzin Tsundue is the anguished voice of those Tibetan exiles who exist in a paradox: in 'reality', a country named Tibet does not exist, at least in the official diplomatic world. Tibet is an 'autonomous region' and an 'integral part' of the People's Republic of China since 1949, when its army seized the Tibetans' homeland and put in place a brutal occupation policy. Tenzin has said that "Every year I have to renew my documents on which I am described as a 'refugee from Tibet'. The Indian government gives me these documents but it does not recognize the existence of a country called Tibet. Isn't it strange?"

A Homeless Poet: Born in Manali, India and educated first at Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh and later in Madras, Ladakh and Mumbai, Tibetan poet and activist Tenzin Tsundue has never felt he belonged anywhere. Any surprise then that he carries his exile within himself? This sense of being in exile is what makes Tenzin, and others like him, dream of dying in his homeland, Tibet. But homeland for him is a dream perpetually put on hold. Yet he cannot not dream of being in a free Tibet. This dream is the source of many of his poems, and of his untiring activism in the cause of a free Tibet. In 1999 Tenzin published his first collection of poems, *Crossing the Border*. His essay 'My Kind of Exile' won the Outlook-Picador Non-fiction Award. He is the General Secretary of Friends of Tibet India organization. I talked to him about activism, writing and the absence of solace. The following is an excerpt from our exchange.

Ajit Baral (Ajit): Dharamsala (where you grew up) shaped you into a fiery activist that you are now. What was the life like there?

Tenzin Tsundue (TT): Dharamsala is a small hill town situated on the nape of a hill in the Dhauladhar range of the Himalayas in North India. This exile residence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama is also the centre of the Tibetans and their exile government. But my growth as an activist (and a writer) is because of the situation I was born into as a Tibetan refugee.

Ajit: You have said somewhere that your activism turned you into a writer. How did that happen? We usually see a writer turning into an activist (Arundhati Roy, for example); not an activist turning into a writer.

TT: It is such a tragedy that the first thing you learned as a child was that you do not belong here and that you cannot own anything here. My parents escaped into India in 1960 after the Chinese occupation of Tibet. We were constantly told that we would return one day and that the life in exile was temporary. My school years in the 1980s and 1990s were spent in anxiety to grow up fast to do something in the freedom struggle. Today I am an activist. My writings are my expressions. As a kid I killed many Chinese soldiers in our Chinese-Tibetan war games. I used to go door-to-door in our refugee camp to call people for our village meetings. I was already an activist. I was born a refugee. I was born to fight for such a noble cause.

Ajit: You keep complaining that Tibetans have no idea of a nation. Why don't they have the notion of a nation?

TT: Before the (Chinese) invasion, Tibet was that peaceful country where spiritual pursuits were the dominant activities in peoples' lives. They were nomads and farmers who lived far from the politics of the capital Lhasa. Occasionally, they would see a government *babu* collecting taxes. Otherwise, there was no relationship between the centre and the periphery.

These Tibetans were suddenly struck by the tragedy of foreign invasion – that too inexplicably from their neighbour and friend, China. Even today, after 45 years of grooming the exiled Tibetans into a democratic, participative community, the nation-building often fails to touch

their individualistic lifestyles. And the notion of 'nation' itself is a new concept to the world. India, Bangladesh and Burma are now new nations. They were only regions like Tibet was.

Ajit: Peripatetic writer Pico Iyer once said that his Indianness is asserting itself within himself as he gets older. Has it been the case with your Tibetanness?

TT: I see my birth as being thrown off the cliff. Somehow I got hold of a root to hang onto. I can neither climb up, nor am I willing to let go and fall down. This is the struggle I fight every day. Tibetans in exile are stateless. We would be labelled as 'splittists' in Tibet; and in exile, except for the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa, no one is granted official asylum. We are not even refugees by law. Tibetan youngsters born in exile are so passionate about Tibet, but they have never seen Tibet in their life. We are living in limbo.

I understand Pico Iyer's feel for his roots. The more I am aware of these realities, the more I am conscious of it. I feel the anxiety. I want to belong somewhere. All that is available are the tiny cultural roots the Tibetan elders are offering us.

Ajit: You climbed the scaffolding to the 14th floor of the Oberoi Hotel, Mumbai, to unfurl a Free Tibet banner during Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji's visit in a solitary act of defiance. Does a solitary act of defiance like yours amounts to anything?

TT: The protest that I was able to do — and the attention it was able to draw to the Tibetan cause — was because along with that climbing were the six hundred strong-willed Tibetans who were sitting on hunger strike, who were running in the streets of Mumbai to protest against the continued Chinese occupation of Tibet. We all had our roles to play. Of course my role was never discussed. I didn't know it would be successful.

The man who stopped the tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989 became a symbol of courage and defiance of the oppressive and corrupt communist Chinese regime. He was not alone. He was a part of the whole democracy movement of China.

Ajit: I am not sure if you are following the issue of more than a hundred thousand Bhutanese refugees languishing in Nepal. Nevertheless, I want to point you to the role India played in evicting the refugees by providing them passage to Nepal. Now when it comes to resolving the issue India is shying away from it, saying the issue is bilateral. You seem to be exhorting the same country to help free Tibet by showing belligerence towards China. Aren't you expecting too much from India?

TT: It is my personal belief that no nation would intervene in political matters unless their interests are at stake or a benefit can be reaped from in-between. Tibet shared such a deep cultural and political relationship with India over thousands of years. Today, India recognizes Tibet as a part of China. This is India's official stand. However, the mass Indian public is singing a different song. They stand with us. As an activist I have travelled extensively in India for our freedom campaign. The Indian public bears witness to our history. We appeal to these wise people of India who stand for truth, who believed and worked with Mahatma Gandhi in their own freedom struggle. Besides, there is India's security and defence at stake in Tibet. Tibet is as much a problem for India as it is for Tibet itself. It will have to take it up for self-interest — if not for Tibet's sake.

Ajit: In the globalized world of overlapping economic interests, a third country cannot put diplomatic pressure on China to free Tibet. The economic interest, let's say, of the United States of America in China is so huge that it wouldn't want to displease China by demanding Tibet's freedom. How do you then think Tibet can be free?

TT: Our fifty years of freedom struggle is a sad story of hope that someone would help us, someone would champion our cause. The sadder story is that we don't seem to have learnt from history. Buddhism and the colourful Tibetan culture may be selling in the west. There is no taker for the real issue: Tibet's freedom.

Unless we are self-reliant, independent of thought and strong from inside, Free Tibet will remain only a dream. For countries like the United States the Tibet issue is only a chess piece to checkmate China

when it seems to become difficult. Yes, we still have a long way to go. The resolution to the Tibetan cause will come out of changes in China. The Chinese Democracy activists in exile are looking for a Free China. I support them. We are working together. It is the colonial mindset of China that is controlling Tibet. So are the people of Southern (Inner) Mongolia, East Turkestan (Xinjiang). Free China will bring in Free Tibet.

Ajit: Are you working on any new book?

TT: Running up and down the hill here in Dharamsala, into the numerous Tibetan refugee camps that are scattered all over India, in an attempt to educate and motivate our people in the freedom struggle leaves no time to write any book. Sometimes, walking down the hill, in buses, talking to people, small lines of poetry are written. They may later come together in another book.

Ajit: You have acknowledged debt to your circle of Mumbai poets in shaping you into a writer. Any other influences?

TT: It was Khalil Gibran's 'Spirit Rebellious' that created a poetic storm in me when I was a schoolboy. But, I was unable to write any 'poetry' during my school and college days. It was during my university days in Mumbai, my classmates and friends appreciated and encouraged me to write. I met Nissim Ezekiel there and received his critiques of my small poems. Adil Jussawalla and Dom Moraes encouraged me so much. Poetry forums – 'Poetry Circle' and 'Loquations' – helped me in my growth. I read Frost, Arun Kolhatkar, Camus, Neruda, Arundhati Roy and Taslima Nasreen.

Ajit: Your writing is very simple. Almost child-like. Is simplicity of language something that comes naturally to you or through a conscious effort?

TT: I do not know any language other than this language. This is the same language I use in my letter writing. My love poems come out hopeless, though.

Ajit: What if the writer in you is overshadowed by the activist in you?

TT: When I am writing, I am a poet. But when I publish them I am an activist. Presently, I see the activist as more useful to the freedom struggle. The activist finds the writer useful. Poetry often comes out in human activities, like the climbing of the hotel facade in Mumbai as an expression for a Free Tibet. Five years ago I walked across the Himalayas to Tibet, from the northern plain of Ladakh, alone and without permission, to live in Tibet. I was arrested, beaten up, put in prison and later got thrown out of there by the Chinese. I write because I have to, because my hands are small and my voice goes hoarse most of the time. Writing to me is not luxury; it is a necessity. The Writer and the Activist live together in me, hand-in-hand.



Note – Ajit Baral is a writer and publisher living in Kathmandu

About the author

Tenzin Tsundue is a restless young Tibetan who, after graduating from Madras, South India, braved snowstorms and treacherous mountains, broke all rules and restrictions, crossed the Himalayas on foot and went into forbidden Tibet! The purpose? To see the situation of his occupied country and lend a hand to the freedom struggle. Arrested by China's border police, and locked up in prison in Lhasa for three months, and was later 'pushed back' to India.

Born to a Tibetan refugee family who laboured on India's border roads around Manali, North India, during the chaotic era of Tibetan refugee resettlement in the early seventies, Tenzin Tsundue is a writer-activist, a rare blend in the Tibetan community in exile. He published his first book of poems, *Crossing the Border*, in 1999 with money begged and borrowed from his classmates at Bombay University. In 2001 he won the 'Outlook-Picador Award for Non-Fiction'. His second book, *Kora*, is already in its eighth edition, and his third title, *Semshook*, is in its third edition. His latest book, *Tsen-Gol*, published in March 2012, is already in its third edition.

Tsundue joined Friends of Tibet (India) in 1999 and campaigns among Indians to win support for Tibet. In January 2002, while Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji was addressing Indian business tycoons in Mumbai's Oberoi Towers, Tsundue scaled scaffolding to the 14th floor to unfurl a Tibetan national flag and a FREE TIBET banner. In April 2005 he repeated a similar stunning one-man protest when Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao was visiting Bangalore. Because of these daring protest actions, Tsundue is often detained and is under police surveillance whenever Chinese leaders visit India.

Tenzin Tsundue's writings have been published in Indian newspapers and magazines and also in the international media. He is also anthologized in Asian and International literary journals.

As a poet he has represented Tibet in Sahitya Akademi organized Second South Asian Literary Conference in New Delhi in January 2005, Poetry Africa in Durban, 2005 and in Jaipur Literature Festival 2010.

Both as an activist and a writer, Tsundue fights tooth and nail for the freedom of his country and plays an important role in the Tibetan struggle. His writings are published online at www.friendsoftibet.org/tenzin and www.TibetWrites.org

About TibetWrites

Exile and dislocation has given us the linguistic dexterity to express ourselves fluently in English and to read world literature beyond Tibet. Influenced by teachers, professors, the riches of libraries, film and the performing arts, our educations in India, Nepal and the diaspora beyond have given us our own unique voices.

TibetWrites emerged from a core of writers and poets creating in the English language; we now include translators fluent in Chinese, English and Tibetan, filmmakers, artists, cartoonists, scriptwriters and researchers – some with privileged educations in Beijing, Lanzhou, Lhasa, the USA, England and India.

Although we post the creative work of Tibetans, **TibetWrites** benefits from the input and collaboration of international friends who are themselves acclaimed writers, editors, photographers, computer wizards, social workers and research analysts.

On our website you will find the works of Woese – the star among our literary contemporaries who writes poems, essays and illuminating blogs in highly creative Mandarin. The political thinking of Baba Phuntsok Wangyal, father of the Tibetan communist movement, is also posted in a translation from Chinese by **TibetWrites'** publishing team from our title – *Baba Phuntsok Wangyal: WITNESS TO TIBET'S HISTORY*. With 14 titles published so far in both English and Tibetan, we now have some exciting new books in the pipeline.

The breadth of our content, both in our books and website, is varied and inclusive. We invite your feedback, involvement and contributions.

Special thanks to: Ibiblio and Worldbridges for hosting us for free, and James "Cyber Wallah" Walker – who single-handedly has worked to empower so many exile Tibetans on the World Wide Web – for being a guide, guru and a friend. And Jane Perkins, our editor.

Tenam
Bhuchung D. Sonam